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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 004127

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TAGS: PGOV PREL ETRD MARR TH

SUBJECT: SENATOR WEBB MEETS WITH THAI PRIME MINISTER
SURAYUD CHULANONT

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY Senator James Webb underscored his support for strong U.S.-Thai relations in a meeting with Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont on July 6. He expressed his confidence that the Thai people would solve the problems the country was facing and would return to democratic, elected government. Webb emphasized the importance of continued U.S. engagement in the region as a force for stability, especially in the light of the growing role of China. The Prime Minister repeatedly pledged to hold elections before the end of the year. The PM noted that the reduction of Thailand's GSP benefits were seen by some as a "tit for tat" response to the RTG's announcement of compulsory licensing for some drugs; some believed that the US had given in to pressure from the pharmaceutical lobby. Surayud said that he had taken office with the goal of solving the political crisis and working on the problems in the South, but had been drawn into many troublesome issues. Senator Webb was accompanied by Ambassador Boyce, Senior advisor Jennifer Park Stout and embassy notetaker. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Meeting with Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont on July 6, Senator Webb emphasized his support for strong U.S.-Thai relations, saying that these were good for the both our countries, as well as for the region. He expressed hope that Thailand could move forward again politically after the bump in the road it had run into last year. Surayud agreed that Thailand had hit "a big pothole on our path to democracy." He assured the Senator, saying "We are trying our best to return to the democratic path." Surayud noted recent progress, including the approval of the new constitution draft. Thailand was proceeding according to the schedule it had laid out, with the constitution referendum scheduled for August 19, a little earlier than previously planned. Surayud said that they also hoped to hold the elections earlier than planned, if possible. The earliest possible date, he said, would be November 25, although "various sectors" are concerned that this was too soon. Other dates under consideration were December 16 or December 23. Surayud said that he did not want the elections delayed until next year. He said that the RTG had polling data which showed that the people wanted elections as soon as possible.

¶3. (C) Senator Webb expressed his confidence, as someone familiar with Thai history, that the Thai people would resolve this problem, and find a good solution. Looking at

larger regional issues, Webb put particular emphasis on the growing role of China, noting that the U.S. had to stay engaged in Asia, and that doing so would promote regional stability. If the U.S. recedes, he said, turbulence will increase. Webb wanted Thailand to know that we value our relations with the countries in this region, including our military relations. He had come to the region to listen to the views of people here, as well as to underscore the strength of our ties. Webb noted that Thailand was always very adept at balancing its international relations, and we wanted to be sure that the U.S. was always part of Thailand's considerations.

¶14. (C) Prime Minister Surayud replied that Thailand was also concerned about China. He said that other leaders in the region he had spoken to agreed. "We have China on the other side of us. We don't want to be on our own," he said. He saw this as a crucial time for Thailand, as it adapted to the developments in the region.

¶15. (C) The Prime Minister raised concerns about the US decision to cut some GSP benefits for Thailand. He said that his country was trying to overcome the lack of investor confidence, to create understanding and trust. He said that sometimes it could appear that the US was following a short term policy based on "tit for tat." Many people here, for example, thought that the decision to cut some of Thailand's GSP benefits was a response to the RTG move on compulsory licensing on some drugs. It would be helpful for the U.S. to make it clearer that this was not the case. Many people also believe that pressure from the pharmaceutical lobby was responsible for the U.S. decision. He said that it would be helpful if the U.S. could reconsider the GSP decision.

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¶16. (C) Senator Webb agreed that both sides should reaffirm the strength of the relationship. If we relied on a "tit for tat" approach, it meant that we were "not looking at the larger relationship." That said, he noted that it was very positive that the Thai had advanced the date of the referendum, thus addressing key U.S. concerns.

¶17. (C) Senator Webb and PM Surayud briefly discussed the challenges of international terrorism and the war in Iraq, noting the importance of drawing on diplomatic means to resolve the conflicts in the Middle East and other areas.

¶18. (C) Prime Minister Surayud acknowledged somewhat ruefully that it was difficult to convince the U.S. Congress that his predecessor (former PM Thaksin Shinawatra) had not set a "good example." Surayud said that he had come under a lot of pressure to accelerate the anti-corruption investigations into Thaksin, but he believed that the government should not interfere in the courts and that it should respect the rule of law. He believed that his critics now understood better that he had proceeded correctly. Surayud said that he had taken office with two main goals: to resolve the political crisis, and to address the problems in the South. But he had been faced with many other issues that he hadn't expected (such disputes over the creation of a public TV channel). Surayud joked that he was personally looking forward to ending his term as PM, and he concluded the meeting by assuring the Senator again that Thailand was moving forward on the road to democracy.

¶19. (U) Codel Webb cleared this cable.
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